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Seal-boxes in context: a new monographic study from Augst

Ton Derks

ALEX R. FURGER, MAYA WARTMANN und EMILIE RIHA, mit Beiträgen von Katja Hunger, Erwin Hildbrand, Vera Hubert und Marie Wörle sowie Jorge E. Spangenberg, *DIE RÖMISCHEN SIEGELKAPSELN AUS AUGUSTA RAURICA* (Forschungen in Augst 44, 2009). 251 S., 130 Abb., 27 Tabellen, 41 Farbtaf. ISBN 3-7151-0044-9. CHF. 100.

This is the first monograph entirely devoted to the study of Roman seal-boxes. As such, it marks the growing interest in this category of small finds. While the first description of Roman seal-boxes dates back to the 17th c.,¹ and their true character had been recognised as early as the 1880s,² a general lack of interest is shown by the many erroneous determinations that occurred until very recently. Both increased knowledge of these objects among finds specialists and their growing prominence in small finds' reports is undoubtedly due in part to the invention of the metal detector. My own first encounter with these objects was in the late 1980s during excavation of the temple site at Empel, where through systematic use of a metal detector large numbers were gathered from the topsoil.³ I well remember my ignorance at the time of their first discovery, for I had never seen such objects before. Metal-detecting has not only increased exponentially the number of seal-boxes brought to light; it has also contributed significantly to our knowledge of the large variety of shapes known.⁴ We are all aware of the problems inherent to the practice of metal-detecting outside the context of a controlled excavation: context recording in most cases will be poor. In this respect, the collection of 138 seal-boxes from Augusta Raurica — the largest number known from a single site — constitutes a unique and welcome exception, since the vast majority come from excavations with well-recorded stratigraphic contexts.

As one might expect from such a monograph, the treatment of the subject is comprehensive. Apart from a documentary section consisting of a catalogue with extensive descriptions of the finds from Augst (147-70), followed by typologically arranged lists of references to finds from elsewhere which serve as references for dating and as a basis for distribution maps (171-85), there is an introductory section (1-32) and a central body of text (33-143).⁵ The introductory section discusses a variety of themes indirectly related to the use of seal-boxes: e.g., the production and sealing of wax tablets, the definition and use of seal-boxes, sealing practices and the composition of wax remains found in some of the boxes. The central part begins with the 'state of the art' of work on seal-boxes and the main research questions, followed by a long section on the typo-chronology (supported by many distribution maps of individual types, accounted for in the lists mentioned above), and shorter sections on the distribution of seal-boxes within the town of Augusta Raurica itself and on archaeometric analyses of the boxes as well as their contents. The book concludes with summaries in German, French and English (187-97), concordances (199-203), a bibliography (205-8), and 41 colour plates with drawings, photographs and colour reconstructions of the enamel decoration. The importance of this publication reaches far beyond the local and regional level of this particular site and in this review I will concentrate on these more general aspects.

1 J. and J. Smetius, *Antiquitates Neomagenses sive notitia rarissimarum rerum antiquarum* (Noviomagi Batavorum 1678) 154.

2 C. Koenen, "Neue römische Gräberfunde zu Neuss und ihre Bedeutung," *BJ* 75 (1883) 160.

3 T. Derks and L. Swinkels, "Bronzen doosjes en verzegelde geloften," in N. Roymans and T. Derks (edd.), *De tempel van Empel* ('s-Hertogenbosch 1994) 146-51.

4 To gain an idea of the impact metal-detecting still has on the discovery of new shapes (not just of seal-boxes but of any category of small finds), a glance through the pages of the *Instrumentum Bulletin* (founded by M. Feugère in the 1990s) may suffice.

5 Chapters and paragraphs have no numbering; the tripartite structure as described here is my own.

Typo-chronology and the question of workshops

As is natural with a first monograph on any particular type of material culture, a large part is devoted to aspects of typology and chronology. Although the finds from Augst constituted their starting point, the authors have done their utmost, by including seal-box shapes not represented at Augst, to present a typological overview which is as comprehensive as possible. Even very rare or unique examples, known only from internet sites maintained by public services, clubs of detectorists or auctioneering firms,⁶ have gone into their sheets (cf. 33).⁷ The resulting typology is thus without doubt as complete as one could wish for. In addition, thanks to the context-based datings from the excavations at Augst, the chronology has been further secured (it is usefully summarised in Table 3).

Based on formal differences, seven main types have been distinguished: pyriform, leaf-shaped, lozenge-shaped, triangular or polygonal, circular, oval-shaped, and square. These have been further subdivided into subtypes on the basis of differences regarding choice of material, decoration or technological aspects. In this way, with up to 9 variants for one of the types (type 7), the number of different subtypes totals 25 (pp. 48-49). If we leave aside differences of terminology with previous studies,⁸ one new main type has been created: the triangular or polygonal seal-box (type 4). As the designation indicates (and as the authors themselves acknowledge), this type is more of a label for heterogeneous forms that did not seem to fit well into one of the other main categories.⁹ Fortunately, given the extremely low number of seal-boxes placed in the newly invented category (none of them from Augst), the overall impact of this questionable decision is negligible.

Although the subdivision into subtypes is a logical step forward which forces us to look more closely into the constructive and decorative details of the objects, minor inconsistencies arise. For instance, whereas for the pyriform shape a distinction has been made only between bone and bronze specimens (types 1a and 1b, respectively), for the circular type 8 different subtypes have been distinguished, one of which covers bronze examples with a relief decoration (type 5b). For the pyriform type we also have bronze examples with relief decoration (cf. 50, fig. 24, esp. nos. 1-2), so why have these not been recognised as a separate subtype?¹⁰ And why was no distinction made between the larger bronze exempla with a rectilinear top side and the smaller bronze ones which are more or less 'oval-shaped' (fig. 24.3-6)? The question becomes immediate, since not just are their forms distinct but their chronology too, as is suggested by the imperial portraits recognised on several examples.¹¹ In light of the research questions

6 Cf. the websites of the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS: www.finds.org.uk), the UK detector finds database (UKDFD: <http://www.ukdfd.co.uk/>) or the Auction platform (www.sixbid.com).

7 From my own database I missed only the unique circular seal-box from Honley near Huddersfield (Yorks.) that stands out by the one eye and 8 *lunulae* attached to its sidewalls: G. F. Hill, "Cartimandua," *NC* 3rd ser., 17 (1897) 293-96, pl. XV.7-9.

8 The terminology is at times confusing: the pyriform boxes of the Augst typology, for instance, which are often made of bone, have been called by others (and by myself, in Derks and N. Roymans, "Seal-boxes and the spread of Latin literacy in the Rhine delta," in A. E. Cooley [ed.], *Becoming Roman, writing Latin? Literacy and epigraphy in the Roman West* [JRA Suppl. 48, 2002] 91) "semi-oval", whereas in the German literature some variants of the leaf-shaped examples have been termed "birnenförmig"! A Table with concordances of the current terms used in the international literature is included on 190.

9 The arbitrariness with which attribution to this new category has been undertaken can be seen from the authors' choice to range seal-boxes such as those depicted in figs. 37.2-3 under the triangular type whilst keeping a seal-box such as the one depicted in fig. 29.27 within the established category of the leaf-shaped type. If the sharp shoulders of fig. 37.3 do set that example somewhat apart from the average leaf-shaped type (to which I myself had assigned it: *ibid.* 126, no. x.13), why then has a similar deviation of form been no reason for attributing fig. 29.27 to the new category using the same kind of rigour?

10 Admittedly, in the typological overview of fig. 23 (p. 48) a distinction is made between type 1b (plain) and 1b Var. (relief-decorated), but this distinction has not been maintained consistently throughout the book.

11 I would either treat these oval-shaped specimens as a separate type of its own (to replace the heterogeneous category of this label described by the authors) or as a new subtype of the leaf-shaped type (where it has close relations in size and dating with their subtype 2c). To the rare examples can be

that the authors had posed, particularly those regarding the identification of specific workshops (33-34), these choices are difficult to understand. One could even ask whether their research questions should not have led to an even more detailed subdivision in order to isolate those particular examples that one suspects derive from one and the same workshop. Such hypotheses might have been formulated especially for specimens of any one type which show a high degree of similarity in decorative patterns, as may be the case with leaf-shaped seal-boxes with a radial decoration of oak leaves (figs. 29.7 and 29.27; pl. 4.34) or with boxes of the same type showing a heart-shaped enamel decoration (fig. 29.1; pls. 2.8-13; cf. also p. 58). On the positive side, a great advantage of the present study over most previous ones is that for all enamelled seal-boxes from Augst colour reconstructions of the decoration are presented.¹² This will not only facilitate easy identification of new finds, but may also help greatly to identify groups of seal-boxes with similar decoration patterns.

A great service has also been done by mapping all the different subtypes on separate distribution maps. Although these do not yet allow the pinpointing of any particular seal-box workshop, at least they reveal regional predilections for certain types (cf. figs. 36, 49, 63). Much in line with work done by M. Feugère and P. Abauzit,¹³ The authors note some striking similarities between certain seal-boxes and particular brooches from Augst (fig. 28) (the great experience of E. Riha in the study of brooches will have been of great help here). Following the example of the French study, the authors conclude that workshops which produced seal-boxes were probably not exclusively focused on the production of these objects, but were rather producing both types of object alongside one another, with specialization organised around particular production techniques rather than particular artefact types.

Finally, several corrections to the received typo-chronology are worth mentioning. The beginning of enamel decoration on seal-boxes can now be firmly dated to the early 1st c., when the first examples on particularly the larger leaf-shaped type occur (60 f. and 53, Table 3; cf. Derks and Roymans [supra n.8] 93). Another correction of received knowledge is the recognition that seal-boxes were probably only made of bone or copper alloys. In addition to the well-known pyriform seal-boxes of copper alloy and bone, bone examples are now being sporadically reported also for the square and circular type (two specimens of each on pp. 44-45).¹⁴ Reports in the literature of examples allegedly made of other materials should be distrusted.¹⁵

added an unprovenanced one from the trade which bears a portrait of Titus: see <http://www.sixbid.com/nav.php?p=viewlot&sid=127&lot=144> (Nomos auction 1, lot 144, 6 May 2009, unsold).

12 Cf., however, the colour plates in L. Jacobi, *Das Römerkastell Saalburg bei Homburg vor der Höhe* (Homburg vor der Höhe 1897) pls. 1-2.

13 M. Feugère and P. Abauzit, "Les boîtes à sceau circulaires à décor zoomorphe riveté d'époque romaine," *RAE* 46 (1995) 41-57.

14 The caption to fig. 22 is in error: the illustration does not exclusively show bone seal-boxes of the pyriform type, but also of the circular (22.6-7) and square types (22.8-9).

15 This reviewer was persuaded by the authors' argument (references cited in n.417) that all seal-boxes that are reportedly made of lead (figs. 69-70) are in fact the positive models that served quickly to produce series of clay models with which bronze examples were cast. I also share their reservation concerning the two specimens allegedly of iron from Velsen. Since I distrusted this determination, I asked the excavator to check it, and A. Bosman (pers. comm. 2001) let me know that only one of the seal-boxes was of iron: "the box (it is just a box, no lid) is completely made of *Weissmetall*, so not of bronze with a *Weissmetall* cover. As far as I remember, the highly fragmented iron example was a corner fragment of a square base of exactly the same dimensions as the complete bronze example. This was at the time the decisive factor for determining it as a seal-box". I had no possibility of seeing the two seal-boxes for myself, but, not being completely convinced, reduced the number of iron examples to one: (supra n.8) 128, nos. 75.2-75.3, nn. 36-37. [It should be noted here that the manuscript for our seemingly more recent article of 2003 (T. Derks and N. Roymans, "Siegelkapseln und die Verbreitung der lateinischen Schriftkultur im Rheindelta," in T. Grünwald and S. Seibel [edd.], *Kontinuität und Diskontinuität — Germania inferior am Beginn und am Ende der römischen Herrschaft. Beiträge des deutsch-niederländischen Kolloquiums in der Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen* (27. bis 30.06.2001) [Ergänzungsbände zum RGA 35, 2003] 242-65) was written earlier than the more extended publication of 2002; for questions of detail such as these, the authors should therefore have consulted the 2002 paper.]

Function

In the first part of the book, several accepted views concerning the use of seal-boxes and the practice of sealing are brought up for discussion. One of them is seal-boxes' alleged function in protecting a seal warranting the sealed condition of a letter or package with valuables whilst in transport.¹⁶ While there are now two examples of seal-boxes in association with purses or small pouches with money, one from Trier (fig. 29.19), the other from Kalkriese (fig. 51), the authors underline that to date there is no single find of a seal-box that was beyond any doubt connected with a wax-tablet.¹⁷ They further argue (21) that the wax in the seal-boxes was not always imprinted with a seal. Some of the boxes are simply too small for allowing the wax to be imprinted with a signet ring, and none of the examples which had the content of beeswax still preserved showed any sign of an imprint. This is the only point in the book where I became confused: while it may be useful to point out the small basis on which many of our presumptions rest, in this passage the language has become too reserved. But perhaps this just slipped through the final editing, since the caption of a photograph showing a half-opened seal-box filled with beeswax (fig. 7) tells us exactly the opposite: "auf der Oberfläche des Siegelstoffs, ist sogar der Abdruck eines Gemmensiegels schwach zu erkennen". Elsewhere in the book (e.g., 18 f., 22; summaries) it is this view that prevails. The concluding excursuses (23 ff.) into types of object that functioned as alternative warranties for the locking and sealing of packages are the first to discuss these different artefact types in connection with each other.¹⁸

Distribution on imperial and local levels

One of the central questions that the authors asked is what conclusions one can draw about the origin of these objects from the general distribution of seal-boxes across the empire. In order to test the expectation that seal-boxes would be rare in the southern and eastern parts, the mapping of finds from all over the empire was an explicit goal. These maps were to constitute the basis for the question where the birthplace of the seal-box is to be sought. If the great majority of the southern and eastern finds are of an early date, then one would be able to conclude that seal-boxes were a Mediterranean invention.

This is perhaps the most ambitious part of the book and I am not quite sure whether the investment of time that has gone into it has brought the answer to the question any closer. Before the authors began their inventory, it had already become clear that many of the examples from the southern part of the empire are made of bone. Since sporadic bronze items of the same type were also known, it could be surmised that the bone seal-boxes had to be placed at the beginning of the development rather than at its end, something which was further suggested by the findspots of these bone types in the empire's northern half, where they occur

16 D. Božič and M. Feugère, "Les instruments de l'écriture," *Gallia* 61 (2004) 22, suggest a third function by asking: "servaient-elles plutôt de preuve d'authenticité pour des archives?"

17 In my view they are too critical (n.18) of the Egyptian diptychon with seal-box that were allegedly found together and are now kept in the Museum of Antiquities, Leiden. As we argued elsewhere ([supra n.8] 90, n.14), chronologically both tablet and seal-box must date from about the same time (late 1st c.).

18 In the case of the bone and wooden locks with recessed sealing well, the authors should have cited M. Feugère, "Cistes en osier à verrou en os," *Bulletin Instrumentum* 14 (2001) 24-26 and/or K. Gostenčnik, "Die Versiegelung römischer Flechtwerkbehälter," *Carinthia I*, 194 (2004) 713-16, who finally succeeded in identifying its precise function as locks used for sealing wickerwork boxes by means of leather straps that are tightened and held together through the lock. The key to this interpretation is an unprovenanced marble cinerary urn in the shape of such a box in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples. To Feugère's distribution map (fig. 4) may be added an unpublished bone specimen from Vechten (NL), which now constitutes the most northerly find, an unprovenanced example in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (R. V. Nicholls, *The Wellcome gems: a Fitzwilliam Museum catalogue* [Cambridge 1983] 27, no. 98: inv. no. GR.194.1981), one wooden and two bone examples from Vindonissa (R. Fellmann, *Römische Kleinfunde aus Holz aus dem Legionslager Vindonissa* [Brugg 2009] 109, inv. nos. 1193, 1193.1, 1193.2). For further additions and a full discussion of this type of object, see now the above-cited monograph by Fellmann, especially pp. 112-13.

exclusively in *oppida*.¹⁹ So it all looked as if the use of seal-boxes had started in the Mediterranean, was subsequently exported to temperate Europe, and then gradually lost importance in the Mediterranean core area. Has the authors' mapping exercise added anything to this hypothesis? I'm afraid not. The key unanswered question is: 'What has been mapped here?' To what extent do the seal-box distributions truly reflect circulation patterns of particular types, and to what degree are they biased by different degrees of research intensity? To take just one example, in the distribution of the leaf-shaped type, fig. 34) four areas of concentration stand out: N Switzerland, the area of the German-Raetian *limes*, the Lower Rhine area, and SE England. Is it just a coincidence that these areas of dense distribution more or less coincide with the backyards of both the authors' and our own home bases (Switzerland, Lower Rhineland), in an area and for a type of site known for their unusually high standards of publication (the *limes* sites of Upper Germany and Raetia) and in a country that offers high accessibility to new finds through the internet (Britain)? Before drawing any conclusions from such maps, the inherent biases should have been discussed much more extensively than has been the case.²⁰ The point is that we hardly know what the *absence* of leaf-shaped seal-boxes in other parts of the empire — such as Greece and N Africa, or large parts of Spain and Syria — mean. While I bet that the time invested to review the literature for these 'empty' areas stands in no comparison to that for the well-researched areas, a hardly less important factor is the markedly different standards of publication for small finds. One could wish that recording and publication of small finds from excavations in the Mediterranean region had been carried out with the same rigour and exhaustiveness as has been done for the military sites of the Upper German-Raetian *limes* or the town of Augst itself, but the reality is different: the examples of Dura and Pompeii suggest that, whenever Roman towns in the Mediterranean are the subject of modern excavation with full publication of the small finds, seal-boxes are commonly present.²¹ And, as the examples reported from these 'model' sites show, they are not limited to the early bone types, but comprise the entire spectrum in circulation at the time each of these towns belonged to the empire (cf. fig. 1 here). If these little windows should make us suspicious, we can only hope that the volume under review has set an example which will be followed by colleagues working on Roman towns elsewhere in the empire, so that future generations may perhaps be able to answer the question of origin and distribution on a much better evidential basis.

Despite all the efforts that have been taken and the magnificent results that have been achieved by the excavations carried out at Augst, the situation hardly seems any better for an appreciation of the spread of seal-boxes on a local level; those patterns that can be seen seem to relate more to differences in areas excavated here than to distinct levels of intensity in ancient sealing practices. While three specimens have been found at Augst within the perimeter of a sanctuary and none from cemeteries (which still remain to be discovered), the large majority stem from habitation quarters. The authors point out that the lack of seal-boxes in public areas such as the forum, where one would expect them in large quantities, must be explained by the fact that the research was limited to a few small trenches. If all that can be said is that the large numbers recovered from residential quarters may confirm the view that seal-boxes were not always used just for 'official' (imperial) purposes, this should make us realise that there remains a lot to be done.

19 M. Čizmař, "Funde von Siegelkapseln aus den keltischen Oppida Stradonice (Böhmen) und Staré Hradisko (Mähren)," *Germania* 68 (1990) 597-600.

20 For a similar discussion on a regional scale, cf. Derks and Roymans (supra n.8) 99; C. Bridger, "Veteran settlement in the Lower Rhineland: the evidence from the civitas Traianensis," *JRA* 19 (2006) 137 ff. Cf. here the authors' remarks in nn. 109-10.

21 Dura: T. G. Frisch and N. P. Toll, *The excavations at Dura-Europos. Final report IV, Part IV. The bronze objects* (New Haven, CT 1949) 37 ff and pl. 8. Pompeii: M. Bonghi Jovino, *Ricerche a Pompei. L'insula 5 della Regio VI dalle origini al 79 d.C.*, vol. 1 (Roma 1984) 343 and pl. 182.7: one square bronze seal-box with three perforations; J.-P. Petit and S. Santoro-Bianchi, *Von Pompeji nach Bliesbruck-Reinheim. Leben im römischen Europa* (Paris 2007) 43: circular box.



Fig. 1. Photograph by the German-Italian photographer Giorgio Sommer (1834-1914) of small finds in the National Museum of Archaeology at Naples, allegedly from the excavations at Pompeii, and grouped together under the label of 'Oggetti da toletta' (Sommer inv. no. 11134; c.1880; G. Desrochers, "Giorgio Sommer's photographs of Pompeii," *History of Photography* 27 (2003) 122 ff., fig. 20). At centre left, more than 20 seal-boxes may be recognised. The picture not only illustrates the errors that have surrounded the interpretation of these objects for a long time (in this case, they may have been interpreted as perfume boxes), but also testifies to the widespread circulation of copper alloy seal-boxes in the Vesuvian towns.

In sum, this book is a milestone in the study of Roman seal-boxes. It has been carefully produced²² and fully lives up to the high standards that have been set by the series in which it has been included. With its fine-tuned typo-chronology, it will be an indispensable working tool for all Roman finds specialists and it will serve as a starting point for all future research on more general questions such as the distribution of these items within the empire or the location of the workshops where they were made.

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²² Among the few typos and errors I mention two that may cause confusion. The caption to fig. 22 treats the circular (fig. 22.6-7) and rectangular specimens (fig. 22.8-9) as though they were pyriform. In the caption to pl. 4, "type 2a" should read "type 2b".